



Board Gets Update from Conservancy Group

By Stephen Crane

stephen.calent@gmail.com

July 12, 2013

The mountains, forests and waterways of Calaveras County have been getting a boost over the past few years, and the economy has benefited as well.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy opened up Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting by presenting a variety of initiatives within the county the group has facilitated over the past few years.

According to its mission statement, the conservancy "initiates, encourages and supports efforts that improve the environmental, economic and social well being of the Sierra Nevada region, its communities and the citizens of California."

It covers 22 counties and more than 25 million acres.

"The conservancy was created as a non-regulatory entity," explained Executive Director Jim Branham at the meeting. "We don't own and manage any of our own property, and I think that's been a really good fit for our region."

On Nov. 7, 2006, California voters passed Proposition 84, also known as the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006, with 53.9 percent support. The legislation provided \$5.4 billion in funding towards that effort.

Of that money, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy was allocated \$54 million in Prop 84 funds for grant distribution, and in Calaveras County, grantees received \$2.175 million in funding for 11 projects throughout the county in five rounds of applications.

“We respond to the ideas that come to us,” Branham said. “We basically look for ideas that bubble up from the community.”

The Calaveras Healthy Impact Product Solutions Project was touted as a prime example of the conservancy’s effort in the county, and the CHIPS program, which helps reduce underbrush and other fire hazards in the county, was awarded \$48,629 in grant money.

“It not only provides jobs, but it cleans up the place,” stated CHIPS supervisor Rod Landreth in a video that was presented to the Board of Supervisors.

The conservancy also provided a \$1 million grant for the Rodden Ranch Conservation Easement, southwest of Copperopolis, as part of its efforts in Calaveras. Big Trees State Park received \$349,000 to help facilitate the effort to keep the forest “crown-fire resistant.”

As Prop 84 funding dries up, the conservancy is not sure what direction it will go.

“Are there any Prop 84 funds left?” asked Supervisor Merita Callaway.

“The future is a little uncertain,” conceded Branham, who stated about \$2 million remain. “We’re looking for opportunities to be included in future application strategies.”

In the meantime, Branham is looking to help regional efforts any way he can, including the Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group, which is another conservation effort aimed at forest and landscape restoration.

Branham also touted the conservancy’s effort in organizing the annual Great Sierra River Cleanup, which takes place September 21.

“We’ve got about 4,000 volunteers now that come together,” he said.

Though the conservancy’s future is in question, the work won’t stop.

“We’ll continue to be involved,” Branham said. “We feel the people in these communities will always know more about these issues than we do, but we’d like to help any way we can.”